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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [MASS](#) [PTER](#) [PBTS](#) [CO](#) [PM](#)
SUBJECT: PANAMA: GOP REQUESTS COLOMBIAN HELOS TO HELP
CONTROL FARC INCURSIONS IN THE DARIEN

Classified By: Ambassador Barbara J. Stephenson for reasons 1.4 (b), (c), and (d)

1st VP/FM Expresses Concern to Ambassador, Seeks Assistance

1. (S//NF) First VP and FM Samuel Lewis expressed his concern over recent events in the Darien and requested U.S. assistance addressing the FARC threat in this border region that abuts Colombia, during a one-on-one meeting at his private office on December 12. The December 11 firefight between members of Panama's National Frontier Service (SENAFRONT) and armed irregulars, apparently belonging to the FARC, in the village of Menene near the Colombian border in the Darien served as the impetus for this meeting. One man was wounded and captured by the SENAFRONT officers in this clash and is currently in Panama City undergoing medical treatment and in police custody. Lewis noted the concern among indigenous leaders in the area, following unconfirmed reports of FARC activity in the Embera-Wounaan Sambu Comarca. (Note: Embera Grand Cacique Betanio Chiquidama asserted to POLOFF on December 12 that "armed irregulars" had forced the residents of two villages to flee on December 12. The precise nature of events to which the Grand Cacique as referring remain unclear. End Note). Lewis asked the Ambassador for night vision goggles (NVG) and USG support for a GOP request to the Government of Colombia (GOC) for helicopters. Ambassador urged the GOP to permit two-three members of the U.S. Navy SEAL Counter Narco-Terrorism training team that is presently in-country training SENAFRONT to deploy to SENAFRONT's Headquarters in Meteti, Darien, to help plan and direct SENAFRONT operations.

Panama Seeks to Lease Colombian Helicopters

2. (S//NF) According to Lewis, the GOP intends to ask the GOC to lease it two-three Bell 212 helicopters, noting that Panama had recently trained a group of pilots from the National Aero-Naval Service (SENAN) to fly these aircraft. He noted that the difficulty SENAFRONT had in getting reinforcements to Menene, following reports that local teachers had been taken captive by and forced to cook for armed irregulars. Lewis noted that this situation had made it clear to the GOP that they needed to provide SENAFRONT with airlift capability immediately and could not wait for the delivery of the five UH-1 "Huey" helicopters presently

being refurbished. Lewis asked that the USG weigh in with the GOC in favor of this request. Anticipating that the GOC might object on the grounds that such a lease would leave a helicopter deficit for Colombian forces, Lewis requested that the USG consider supplying Colombia with more helicopters to "backfill" behind this request. Lewis noted that Panama could not request the helicopters directly from the U.S. because Panama would not allow U.S. pilots to fly in the Darien, for fear of U.S. casualties, and the U.S. would not allow Panamanian pilots to fly U.S. helicopters.

Panama Seeks NVGs

13. (S//NF) Lewis also asked for immediate delivery of night vision goggles (NVGs) to allow SENAFRONT to operate more effectively at night. Post's Office of Defense Cooperation (ODC) sent a representative to SOUTHCOM who picked up 20 NVGs that had been previously acquired for SENAFRONT and other Panamanian security forces. When Ambassador reported that ODC anticipated bringing NVGs to Panama on December 15, Lewis said he was extremely pleased with the Embassy's and SOUTHCOM's rapid response.

Ambassador Urges GOP to Accept SEAL Support

14. (S//NF) Ambassador reminded Lewis that ten-member U.S. Navy SEAL Counter-Narco/Terrorism (CNT) training team was presently in Panama (but not the Darien) training SENAFRONT.

She urged the GOP to permit two-three SEALs to deploy to the SENAFRONT Headquarters in Meteti, Darien to help plan and direct SENAFRONT missions in the Darien. (Note: ODC has been in touch with SOUTHCOM and SOCSOUTH to coordinate this prospective change to the CNT's mission as well as a the deployment of two-three SEALs to Meteti.) Lewis, wary of the offer, responded that President Torrijos did not want U.S. military personnel in harm's way or directly involved in the fighting. Ambassador underscored that these SEALs would deploy solely in an advisory capacity well away from the front lines, that this team would help SENAFRONT plan successful operations, and that these experts would also help avoid any situation that might lead to a tactical defeat for SENAFRONT. Ambassador stressed that this small team was well known to and had been working with SENAFRONT already. Lewis agreed to present the offer to President Torrijos and report back upon his return from Brazil on December 18.

Comment

15. (S//NF) The extent of and reasons behind the up-tick in FARC activity in the Darien are unclear. When the story that the Menene incident might be part of a larger incursion broke in the media on December 14, the only official available to be quoted by the Panamanian media was Colombian Defense Minister Jose Manuel Santos, who claimed that the incidents were part of a broad based retreat into Panama by scattered and hungry elements of the 57th and 58th Fronts. The situation on the ground remains confused, but the GOP seems to have reluctantly come to the conclusion that it must take action to assure the country that the situation is under control. Post will continue to push the GOP to develop a comprehensive strategy for dealing with the Darien, which takes into account the legal framework in which SENAFRONT is operating. We will hold off on offering any further material assistance until we see signs of such a strategy, which would allow the GOP to full take advantage of the assistance.

STEPHENSON